

Public school leaders must be empowered to achieve success

By Darrel Galera, John Sosa, Penelope Tom, RandiAnn Porras-Tang and Randall Roth

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A recent survey of public school principals reveals frustration with the way Hawaii's highly centralized Department of Education functions.

The Star-Advertiser has made the survey results available to the public on its website, including each of the 347 specific comments by individual principals (see bit.ly/1nZLBle). They lay bare a "command and control" mentality at the top: Two out of three principals say they fear retaliation if they express disagreement with systemwide leadership.

Public education in Hawaii should be among the very best in the nation.

Why are the public schools not thriving?

All roads lead to a dysfunctional governance system. Nowhere else do politicians and bureaucrats wield so much control over not just how money is spent, but how children are educated.

Barely half of the \$3 billion in expenditures actually gets to the classrooms each year. Central bureaucrats, who in many cases have never served in a school or as a principal, force teachers and principals to fit every student into one-size-fits-all improvement models.

The most recent one includes unworkable accountability systems and constant testing in limited areas, simply to gather "data" that has little to do with actual learning.



Clockwise from top left: Darrel Galera is retired as Moanalua High School's principal; John Sosa is retired as Kaiser High School principal; Penelope Tom is retired as Kaimuki High School principal; RandiAnn Porras-Tang is retired as Waialua High and Intermediate School principal (Tom is executive director and Porras-Tang is president of the Hawaii Association of Secondary School Administrators); and Randy Roth is a University of Hawaii law professor.

Many educators have called for school empowerment over the past 40 years. Piecemeal initiatives have been enacted by the Legislature, though not embraced by the DOE for lasting effect. Examples include School Community Based Management and School Community Councils that were promptly sabotaged by central administrators.

The Reinventing Education Act of 2004 was supposed to move decision-making closer to the schools, yet the DOE is now more centralized than ever.

Charter schools were supposed to be free to innovate. Now they are increasingly subject to one-size-fits-all, bureaucratic meddling and requirements not unlike the straitjacket restrictions long imposed on the regular schools.

Empowered schools require a systemwide culture of high expectations, visionary and adaptive leadership, and technology innovation at all levels.

The teaching profession will need to be elevated. Quality training tailored to the needs of teachers, principals, and senior leadership will be essential. Leaders of empowerment must not just drive the bus but fill all the seats.

Principals in particular must fully embrace the responsibilities that will come with centering the funding at the school level. Newly adopted performance contracts that clarify the basis on which each principal will be held accountable are a good first step.

None of this necessarily requires additional funding. With true school empowerment, at least 90 cents out of each education dollar must be spent at the school level.

Unions are not the problem, but the people on both sides need to begin each day jointly pledging to put the interests of the children ahead of the interests of the adults — and mean it!

Perhaps you are wondering who is going to make sure all this happens. Prior to 2011, ultimate power over public education was evenly spread among an elected Board of Education, the Legislature, and the governor. Each had just enough power individually to frustrate the other two, but not enough to be held accountable for results.

Because of a constitutional amendment in 2010, each member of the Board of Education now serves at the pleasure of the governor. So finally it is possible to hold an elected official accountable for the success or failure of our public education system.

We propose that the public demand that the governor finally do what has eluded the state for decades: Empower schools.

The public must insist that the governor back up his words with a comprehensive plan of action, including measurable milestones on the way to spending 90 cents of every education dollar at the school level.

The system will not reform itself. It never has and never will. Even with the governor's support, we will need bottom-up leadership that is first and foremost committed to school empowerment, and selfless leadership at the top that wants to work themselves out of a job.

None of this will be easy, but must be done — for the future of Hawaii and its children.

